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ABSTRACT

Overcoming parents' negative stereotypes of career and technical education (CTE) is the goal of the Business and Education Symposium (BES) at Stratford High School, Goose Creek, South Carolina. The BES program has these four main goals: (1) educate parents about the changing demands of the workforce, so as to affect student course selection; (2) give business leaders the opportunity to be heard, especially about what problems they are facing in their specific industries; (3) open the doors of communication so all parents and students may take CTE courses seriously as an avenue to success; and (4) open the doors of the school to businesses, so they can see what the school is doing to deal with the problems businesses face. Some of the steps taken by the school to develop and conduct the BES included making teachers more aware of programs offered and skills taught in CTE courses so they can better counsel students; developing business partnerships; developing networks of school and businesses; securing commitments from businesses to be represented on the evening of the BES; securing commitments from teachers and postsecondary professors to participate; advertising the program; evaluating the effectiveness of the program; showing appreciation to the participants; securing funding sources, and timing the program effectively. The symposium was very successful at Stratford, and it is expected to continue as an evening event every year. (KC)

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One School...One Step

We've all heard the staggering statistics about the changing demands of the workforce – the need for technical expertise coupled with academic knowledge. We've all listened to speaker after speaker drill into us that now is the time to do something about our educational system and the lack of preparation we are imparting on our students before they are left behind. Yes, we educators have heard this message loud and clear. The problem is, all of these well-informed speakers have been preaching to the pulpit. We know! So, the essential problem has lain in the question: How do we get this overwhelming message across to the correct audience in order to effect change?

Well, the target audience for career counseling has always been the students, since they are the ones who will have to take the courses and actually learn something useful. Sometimes we are successful in bestowing our knowledge and sometimes we're not. However, with over 65% of jobs requiring the mixture of both technical skills in addition to academic excellence, sometimes is just not good enough. So, we felt at Stratford High School that we needed a new approach.

Every school contains a different marketing mix, and at Stratford, the realization hit home. Students may go home after attending one of the many school-to-career functions excited and full of ambition and tell their parents, "I want to take AutoCAD Drafting next year!" In itself, that would be wonderful, but parents will often reply to Little Johnny's revelation, "No, I don't think so, son. That's a vocational course. You need to take these college preparatory courses so you can go to college when you graduate." See, the fight against the negative stigma associated with vocational courses that existed 20 years ago still continues. No longer are these courses a dumping ground,

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or they shouldn't be. Every potential engineer should take two years of AutoCAD. Every student wanting to enter the health care profession (doctor, physical therapist, dentist, vet, nurse, lab technician, etc.) should take two years of Health Sciences where he/she will have the opportunity to specialize in a field and co-op in that area, gaining first-hand, on-the-job experiences. The list can go on and on; it's oh so easy to preach to the pulpit.

From the depths of desperation sprang a new idea. Why not develop a new program to re-educate our parents about the changing workforce demands? Why not let these same parents fall prey to the business representatives who have been lecturing and essentially yelling at educators for the past 5 years or more on what has to change? After all, these parents might want their children to actually move out one day and become self-sustaining. We've all seen media blitzes from the local technical schools and various other sources attempting to inform the public on such issues, but they are essentially ineffective by themselves. Hit and miss doesn't cut it. Much more is needed to change the thought processes of parents who were raised with preconceptions about technical courses. Short spurts on the radio or television are no match for this type of prejudice. So, Stratford High School decided to try to combat this disease with its first Business and Education Symposium.

BES Goals and Successes

The BES by no means is a panacea for what ails our educational system, but it certainly is a start, one step in the right direction. The program has 4 main goals:

BES Program Design

The program was designed very simplistically and the steps are as follows:

1) Meet with your local technical school officials. For Stratford High School, Trident Technical College was vital to the program's success. A meeting was held with the deans of all of the programs that we share in common (Health Sciences, Engineering, Business Education, etc.). After everyone was informed of the program's intent and how it could positively effect the high school, the technical school, and the local industries, everyone was on board. We decided to contact the members of each program's advisory board to participate in the program. This tactic ensured that we were getting the leading industries in the Tri-County area, and it was quite successful. Over 50 leading business leaders were willing and eager to assist in the program.
2) Secure your panel speakers. We selected three industries that are large employers in the area and that also experience increasing employment shortages with the increasing technical demands: The Medical University of South Carolina, Santee Cooper Utilities, and Sprint Technologies. The program was designed so that these three speakers, after being introduced, would each speak to the audience about the changing trends in the workforce both locally and globally. They addressed the demands placed on employees in their companies and the education and skills needed to become employable. Parents were able to address questions to each speaker after their short presentations.

1) Educate **parents** on the changing demands of the workforce, so as to effect student course selection. Targeting parents is what makes this program unique from other career-type programs.
2) Give business leaders the opportunity to be heard, especially about what problems they are facing in their specific industries.
3) Open the doors of communication so all parents and students may take CTE courses seriously as an avenue to success.
4) Open the doors of the school to businesses, so they can see what we are trying to do to deal with the problems they face.

We were not only successful in achieving these goals, but we experienced some other very positive side effects as well:

1) Teachers were forced to become more aware of programs offered and skills taught in the CTE courses so they can better career counsel students. They also found that CTE courses reinforce what the traditional programs teach, realizing there are many opportunities for cross-curricular lessons.
2) Business Partnerships were developed as a result of the program. Businesses appear to be willing to invest their time and money in education when they can see a return on their investment. These partnerships not only include monetary support for instructional supplies and materials but also internship and cooperative opportunities for our students.
3) Networks were developed which enabled Stratford High School to fill a teacher vacancy, taking an employee from one of the businesses represented.

3) Secure your commitments from each business to be represented that evening. Develop a database of businesses, contact names, addresses, and phone numbers so that correspondence will be made easier. A minimum of four letters of correspondence will be sent. Mail merge increases your efficiency. Make sure the business representatives are completely informed about the intent of the program and what their roles are. They were prepared to talk to parents and students at their designated tables about the same issues (trends, educational demands, technical skills needed, etc.) while being career specific. The business leaders will need to come early enough to set up their tables with information parents could take home and digest.

4) Secure your commitments from your teachers and post-secondary professors. We designed the program so that a Stratford High School teacher, a Trident Technical College professor, and a business leader would man each table. We decided this format would more easily show parents and students the transition from Stratford High School to the career of choice. We were certainly not pushing Trident Technical College as the only avenue to success. In fact, we thoroughly discussed five avenues:

    a) Stratford High School ⇒ career

    b) Stratford High School ⇒ technical school ⇒ career

    c) Stratford High School ⇒ four year college/university ⇒ career

    d) Stratford High School ⇒ technical school ⇒ four year college/university ⇒ career

e) *Stratford High School ⇒ technical school ⇒ career ⇒ four year college/university

*This happens to be a favorite, because so many businesses are willing to pay for the four year degree if they can just hire employees with the technical background.

These commitments are not only to appear that evening, but also to become educated about the programs and skills in order to effectively career counsel. In addition, the programs were open for parents to view the technology used in the classrooms/labs.

5) Advertise your program. Saturate the local newspapers, radio, and television with requests for advertisement. Include these businesses in your program to ensure coverage. Send letters home to parents, informing them of the program. Saturate the school with information on the program (announcements, posters, school newspaper, school broadcasts, etc.). Get all of your teachers on board so they will discuss the program with their students. Make sure the program is open to the entire community, not just your school's family. The more that are informed, the better off we are. People talk and can and will carry your message.

6) Evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Sometimes this part can sting a bit. We decided there were two ways to evaluate our program – the actual enrollment in the CTE courses and surveys. We found the enrollment skyrocketed. In fact, all of our CTE programs had at least double the number of requests than could be accommodated. Some had much more. For

example, Automotive Technology had over 200 requests, but we could accommodate only 66. Wow! What a problem to have! We don't know if we can attribute this phenomenal number of requests solely to the symposium, but we sure like to think we were at least partially responsible with over 800 parents and students listening to what we had to say that evening. The surveys were sent to all business leaders, teachers, and professors who participated. The survey was based on a Likert Scale, and the results showed that over 96% of the participants felt the program was very successful. We did learn some things to change for this year's program, but constructive criticism is always good when it is truly constructive. For example, all business leaders should be in the auditorium when the panel speaks so that we can make sure all parents hear the presenters. Several parents wanted to immediately go from table to table. In addition, we need to start advertising the program earlier. These things we can and will do. Overall, the program was rated a great success.

7) Show your appreciation to the participants. Involve your school programs when you do this. When meeting with the panel speakers to discuss their presentations, the Culinary Arts program fixed them a nice lunch. On the night of the program, prior to its beginning, the Culinary Arts program prepared a feast for all business leaders, professors, and teachers. Not only did they prepare the buffet, but they were also on hand to serve. The business leaders were so impressed by our students' abilities, as their work was

superior to anything they had seen locally. In fact, one leader presented a gift to each of the students responsible for the display of culinary talent.

8) Secure your funding source. Certainly, this is not the last item that needs to be addressed, but it certainly is a vital one. The program was initially funded from a School-to-Work mini grant. We were very thankful for the award. When the program was not funded from the same source this year, another grant through the CTE department provided the $4,000 budget. The budget includes the expenses for items such as the following: table/table cloth/table skirt rental, program printing (professionally), correspondence related costs, consumables (all meals), custodial services, videography, name tags, photography, brochures, School-to-Career related materials, etc. Each parent and student who participated in the program received a bag of materials they could take home to study.

9) Time your program effectively. Last year, we held the program just prior to registration. We wanted to ensure the information presented was fresh in the minds of parents and students when they developed their educational plans. We plan to hold this year's program March 1st, keeping the same idea in mind. Also, keep in mind when your school hold its annual career fair. Career fairs are traditionally held during the school day, for students. The BES should be held at night, when parents are off work and are able to attend. Try to schedule the two programs close together so that the information is fresh for all concerned right before registration.

Final Words

Another way to gauge the success of your program is to walk around on the evening of the event and listen to the conversations being held at each table. One parent that attended without her child was so engrossed in conversation that the program was nearly over when she asked the business leader if he would remain long enough for her to go to her son's job and bring him back to the school so he could hear what she was learning. Of course, the business representative was thrilled to do so. Right now, that very student is working an internship with that company.

I didn't truly realize the impact of the program until a parent called me a week later and apologized for missing the program. She then stated she heard it was wonderful and wanted to know when I was planning to hold another similar event. When I told her the next school year, she was disappointed. I was far from it.

Will this program solve the numbers problem so many schools are facing? Maybe not right away, but it could. Will it change the misconceptions people hold about technically oriented courses in high schools? Maybe not right away, but it could. Will it make businesses get involved in the local schools? Maybe not, but it could. Will it make parents and students more aware of the changing trends of the workforce? Definitely, it should. The questions could go on endlessly, but the bottom line is that the Business and Education Symposium is just one step in the right direction.

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